Transgender Experience and Identity

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Abstract

In this chapter, we review and critique how conventional models of gender and sexual identity development have represented the experiences of transgender individuals, and we argue for an expanded model of transgender identity development which can accommodate the diversity of their lived realities. *Transgender* is a broad category typically used to denote any individual whose gender identity or presentation either violates conventional conceptualizations of "male" or "female" or mixes different aspects of male and female role and identity. Despite increasing social scientific acknowledgment and investigation of transgender experience, most contemporary perspectives presume that the primary identity dilemma for transgender individuals is a conflict between one's psychological gender and one's biological sex, such that the normative and healthy endpoint of transgender identity development is the achievement of a stable, integrated, unambiguous identification as 100% male or 100% female, often achieved via some form of physical transformation aimed at bringing one's psychological gender and one's physical gender presentation into alignment. Yet there is increasing evidence that such dichotomous models of gender fail to accommodate the true complexity and diversity of transgender experience. Hence, in this chapter we argue for broader, more flexible models of gender identity development among transgender individuals which can accommodate the fact that for some of these individuals, identity development will have a linear trajectory leading to a singular outcome, whereas for others, identity development may be a recursive process that accommodates multiple and shifting identity states over time. We explore the implications of such an expanded model of identity development for clinical practice and intervention with transgender individuals.

By the age of 3 or 4, most children have developed a clear sense of gender identity – that is, an enduring sense of themselves as male or female – which persists throughout their lifespan. Yet for transgender individuals, this is not the case.

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Transgender is a broad category typically used to denote any individual whose gender-related identification or external gender presentation conflicts in some way with their birth sex, and who therefore violates conventional standards of unequivocal "male" or "female" identity and behavior. The very fact that the present volume includes a chapter on transgender identity signifies the enormous changes that have occurred in psychological research on gender identity and its development and expression. In recent years, empirical research on the experiences of children, adolescents, and adults who violate conventional norms for gender-typical behavior, or who are consciously questioning their gender identity, has increased dramatically (Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Denny, Leli, & Drescher, 2004; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Halberstam, 2005; S. Hines, 2007; Johnson, 2007; Lev, 2004; Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006; Seil, 2004; Wren, 2002).

Nonetheless, contemporary views of gender-transgressive individuals tend to interpret their experiences through a rigid and dichotomous model of gender which presumes that the primary identity dilemma for transgender individuals is a conflict between one's psychological gender and one's biological sex. To be sure, this is quite commonly the case for *transsexual* individuals, who typically report feeling that they are "trapped in the wrong body" and who seek to bring their psychological sense of gender and their physical sex into alignment through a combination of physical transformation (via clothes, makeup, demeanor, hormones, or surgery) and a formal change in legal status. Yet, although transsexualism might be the most widely known form of transgender experience (among both psychologists and laypeople alike), it is certainly not the only one. In fact, the word and concept "transgender" came into use specifically because many individuals with more complex and ambiguous experiences of gender identity – for example, individuals who feel that they are *both* male and female, or *neither* – were poorly described by models of transsexualism. Moreover, individuals with new forms of gender blending and bending continue to stretch the range and variety of identities that fit under the transgender umbrella.

Hence, our goal in this chapter is to provide an introduction to the diversity of transgender experience, review previous research on the development of transgender identity, and argue for broad, dynamic, and flexible models of transgender identity. Such flexibility is critical if such models will successfully accommodate all forms of transgender expression, from individuals who seek to change their gender expression, either permanently or temporarily, to those who seek to blend their gender expression, to those who seek altogether novel forms of context-dependent gender identity and presentation. Specifically, we maintain that identity models organized around *the process of change and transition itself*, rather than the presumed goal of achieving a stable and socially intelligible "new gender," will be more successful in describing the diverse experiences of transgender individuals and in guiding future research on their healthy development and self-actualization.

Sex and Gender: Concepts Defined

Academic psychology continues to use the terms sex and gender relatively interchangeably (M. Hines, 2004; Schaefer & Wheeler, 1995), yet the two terms are semantically distinct. *Sex* is most often used to describe one's status as male or female (Deaux, 1993; Ruble, Martin, & Berenbaum, 2006), determined biologically via sex chromosomes and assessed at birth by the appearance of external genitalia (which generally suffices, except for rare disorders of sexual differentiation in which there may be disjunctures between chromosomal sex and genital morphology). In contrast, *gender* refers to the trait characteristics and behaviors culturally associated with one's sex (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; M. Hines, 2004). Gender also refers to a person's subjective judgments and inferences about sex including stereotypes, roles, presentation, and expressions of masculinity and femininity (Deaux, 1993; Ruble et al., 2006). Gender *identity* represents

a person's sense of self as a boy/man or a girl/woman. As such, it carries an expected set of role behaviors, attitudes, dress style, and appearance. Gender identity is implicitly presumed to develop in a manner that corresponds directly with biological sex, such that boys develop male identities and girls develop female identities (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972; Zucker & Bradley, 1995).

Before proceeding, it bears noting that this overall framework relies on a central assumption – that sex is a "natural category" individuals are *born* with, whereas gender represents the cultural meanings attached to that category – which has come under fire over the years. Queer theorists such as Butler (1990) have criticized this framework for reifying the distinction between biology (sex) and culture (gender), for naturalizing categorical distinctions between "male" and "female" bodies and biology, and for obscuring the manner in which social discourse constructs and creates *sex* in the same way that it creates *gender*. Fausto-Sterling (1993), similarly, has argued that the notion of "two and only two" sexes is a cultural rather than a "natural" phenomenon, and that we might just as well posit five biological "sexes," based on the surprisingly high number of children born with ambiguous or mixed genitalia. We will revisit critiques of the sex/gender binary later on; for now, we employ it for the sake of clarity and consistency, while noting its shortcomings.

Developmental research on gender identity typically focuses on the age and the processes by which children develop understanding in three major domains: categorical sex differences (Ruble et al., 2007), self-awareness and constancy of biological sex (Kohlberg, 1966), and gender-congruent role behaviors (Bem, 1983). Research suggests that consistent labeling of men and women as "male" or "female" occurs by age three, and that stability in one's own self-labeling as male or female occurs between age 3 and 5, although there continue to be conflicting findings on the specific timing of the latter milestone (Maccoby, 1990; Ruble et al., 2007; for a more extensive review of research on normative gender identity, see Bussey, Chapter 25, this volume).

Children and adults who fail to develop a stable, psychological sense of gender that corresponds with their biological sex, and who meet certain cross-gender behavioral traits, may be diagnosed with *gender identity disorder (GID)* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Carroll, Gilroy, & Ryan, 2002; Levine et al., 1999). According to the most recent version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV), GID is characterized by "a strong and persistent cross-gender identification" (Criteria A), by a "persistent discomfort with [one's biological] sex or a sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex" (Criteria B), "not concurrent with a physical intersex condition" (Criteria C), and by "clinically significant distress" (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 581). Cross-gender identification may also be demonstrated by preferences for gender nonconforming roles in fantasy play, for wearing the clothing of the opposite sex, and/or the desire to engage in activities associated with the opposite sex (such as standing to urinate among girls and sitting to urinate among boys).

Often, though not always, a child with GID will spontaneously state, sometimes as early as 2 or 3 years of age, that his/her true gender identity does not match his/her biological sex (Strong, Singh, & Randall, 2000; Zucker & Bradley, 1995). The DSM-IV revised its definition of GID diagnosis to distinguish childhood manifestations from adolescent and adult manifestation, while still acknowledging that GID may persist across the life course (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Zucker, 2005a). Although not all adolescents and adults who meet the clinical criteria for GID consider themselves transsexual, it is safe to say that the vast majority of self-identified transsexuals meet the clinical criteria for GID. The clinical criteria carry substantial weight, because the American medical community polices access to hormonal treatment and sex reassignment surgery fairly rigidly, restricting it to transsexual adults who meet the strict criteria for GID or gender dysphoria (Denny et al., 2004; Seil, 2004), such as early appearing and persistent gender confusion, intense and consistent motivation to be the opposite sex (and

not simply to periodically dress as the opposite-sex, as is characteristic of transvestitism), intense discomfort or dislike of one's body, and persistence of these subjective experiences in the face of directed attempts at "retraining" (Bockting, Knudson, & Goldberg, 2007; Devor, 2004; Docter & Fleming, 2001; Lippa, 2001; Schaefer & Wheeler, 1995). Notably, transsexual individuals meeting these clinical criteria typically report markedly improved psychological outcomes after undergoing surgical transitions, reporting higher levels of self-esteem and more positive body images (Wolfradt & Neumann, 2001).

In contrast, the vast range of transgender-identified individuals who claim that they are "both" or "neither" male/female, or who adopt complex constellations of male/female identification and presentation, are not considered by the medical community to be appropriate candidates for sex reassignment. In fact, many such individuals do not seek complete sex reassignment at all, preferring instead to modify selected parts of their body (such as breasts or facial hair) or to forgo physical change altogether and focus on modifications in their social status and legal standing (Bilodeau, 2005; Lev, 2004). This is consistent with the fact that such individuals typically reject the notion that they are simply "trapped in the wrong body" and hence do not view a wholesale substitution of one gender identification for the other as a personal goal or as a potential solution to any experiences of distress or discomfort they might face. It is this group of gender-fluid individuals that poses a fundamental dilemma to our attempts to develop broad-based models of transgender identity development.

From Transgender Experience to Transgender Identity

Transsexualism yields fairly straightforward suppositions and predictions regarding normative identity development: whereas the average boy or girl seeks and achieves a clear, consistent, and enduring sense of gender identity between the ages of 2 and 5, the transsexual individual must revisit this process repeatedly in the context of his/her gender transformation. Transsexual identity development, then, may not entail the development of a *transsexual* identity at all, but movement *through* a transsexual or transgender identity to a new identity as unequivocally male or female (Bockting & Coleman, 2007; Wilson, 2002). The highest form of success, within this context, is to "pass": to accomplish such a complete change in gender status that the individual's history of questioning and confusion is replaced by – or more accurately, transformed into – a lived authenticity. Many transsexuals wish *not* to be thought of as "a woman who used to be a man," or "a man who used to be a woman," but simply a "woman" or a "man," with the body and legal status to match (e.g., Girchick, 2008; Wilson, 2002). Of course, this is not uniformly the case. Some transsexuals maintain a strong connection to the transsexual community even after completing a full gender change, and some maintain identity labels (such as "transman" or "transwoman") that acknowledge their history of gender transition.

Decisions about whether to embrace or "move beyond" one's history of gender transition might be moderated by developmental status. An increasing number of individuals are self-identifying as transgender and seeking sex reassignment at earlier ages (Zucker, Bradley, Owen-Anderson, Kibblewhite, & Cantor, 2008). Some of these youth adopt intermediate identities such as "tranny boys," suggesting that they perceive mixed, fluid, and ambiguous gender presentations as potentially stable identity outcomes. Little is currently known about the full range of factors which influence transsexual youths' and adults' motives to embrace an enduring identification as "trans" – even after completing a full gender transition – or to view such identities as temporary stepping stones along the route to a normative "female" or "male" identity. This is clearly a priority for future research.

As noted earlier, perhaps the most important development in research on gender over the past 20 years has been the realization that the transsexual trajectory is not the only form of transgender experience, and may not even be

the modal one (Devor, 2004; Ekins & King, 1999; Gagné, Tewksbury, & McGaughey, 1997; Halberstam, 2005). Rather, similar to the aforementioned case of "tranny boys," an increasing number of transgender individuals have come to adopt and embrace fluid, shifting, and ambiguous gender identifications, which seek to combine attributes of masculinity and femininity rather than to "switch" from one gender identity to the other. For example, Gagné et al. (1997) charted multiple identifications in their diverse sample of transgender participants, all of whom were born male. In addition to transsexuals (i.e., those who desired to permanently adopt unequivocally female identities), their sample included preoperative transsexuals (who hoped to pursue sex reassignment surgery in the future, but had not yet done so), nonoperative transsexuals (who lived socially as women and made use of hormones and breast augmentation to feminize their appearance, but had no plans to pursue full-blown sex-reassignment surgery), radical transgenderists (who maintained a masculine gender identity but cross-dressed in a conscious attempt to explore feminine aspects of their personality and challenge traditional binary notions of gender), and ambigenderists and "third-gender" individuals (who lived alternately as men and women or consciously combined masculine and feminine characteristics, emphasizing the degree to which their bodies and self-concepts occupied a spectrum of female and male characteristics).

Similarly, consider the experience of several transwomen interviewed by Girchick (2008), all of whom challenged the notion that transgender individuals sought to resolve any discrepancy between an internal and external sense of gender (typically through sex-reassignment surgery), and who instead gave voice to an empowering embrace of gender ambiguity or fluidity, and a rejection of dichotomous models of sex and gender.

> Because I am so openly gender-variant and fluid, I reserve the right to express the truth of that "in the moment". . .. I believe in "shape shifting" with truth. . ... Is the goal to get from A to B or is the goal to remain open to fluidity? That's the key. So, it's not so much that surgery will necessary limit your expression, it's the mindset that goes with your need for surgery. Because most folks who want surgery think they're only going from A to B, and that is a limiting mindset (p. 70).

> I feel like there's tremendous pressure to have an external appearance and body that are consistent with the internal identity. . . I have spent much of my life desperately wishing I had a male body. But I'm starting to feel comfortable with the apparent contradictions between my female body and my male presentation. This contradiction is part of my strength and my identity (p. 71).

> I think when you're born one and cross over to the other side, so to speak, you're really neither. . ... And I think a lot of us feel like we are lying, and then we are forced to lie, and ugh. It's like they get you coming and going and there's no way you can in good conscience mark M or F, 'cause neither applies. Or both apply (p. 74).

The terminology contemporarily used by transgender individuals is also notably diverse, including (but not limited to) gender blender, gender bender, gender outlaw, gender queer, drag king/queen, trans, transgender(ist), and queer (Carroll et al., 2002; Ekins & King, 1999). Such individuals pose a fundamental challenge to binary notions of gender by persistently violating or collapsing the border between masculine and feminine appearance and self-concept. Queer theorists have tended to embrace such "gender outlaws" (Bornstein, 1994), heralding their opposition to the hegemonic notion that there are, and should be, "two and only two" genders (Fausto-Sterling, 1993; Feinberg, 1996; Roen, 2002).

Psychologists, however, have taken a more mixed and ambivalent approach to these diverse forms of transgender (reviewed in Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006), especially when adopted by adolescents. Is it healthy to claim a permanently liminal form of gender identity? How can we speak of "transgender identity development" if no single identity "goal" can be identified, or if the stated goal involves a wholesale deconstruction of the notion of a fixed and stable self? After all, as early as 1987, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) recognized a lack of coherent identity as a risk factor for poor mental health outcomes (American Psychiatric Association, 1987)? How do transpeople conceptualize their gender identities, and

negotiate the constancy of their biological sex with a conflicting gender identity schema?

There is scant empirical data available on such questions. In contrast to the extensive body of research on conventional gender identity development (Kohlberg et al., 1974; Ruble et al., 2006, 2007; Bussey, Chapter 25, this volume), little research focuses on the developmental processes or the structure and properties of transgender identities in nonclinical populations (Gagné et al., 1997; Mason-Schrock, 1996), and almost no longitudinal studies have been conducted on this topic. Rather, the majority of research on transgender populations focuses on their experiences of discrimination, limited access to health care, physical health challenges, conflicting surgical outcomes, and mental health concerns (Devor, 2004; Lev, 2004; Zucker & Bradley, 1995). Furthermore, most of the existing empirical research on gender nonconformity and transgender individuals has focused on gender atypical *males*, usually in childhood (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Zucker, 2005b; Zucker & Bradley, 1995). In contrast, there is a dearth of empirical research on normative or resilient developmental outcomes among gender nonconforming and transgender natal females (Zucker, 2005b).

Existing Models of Transgender Identity

Nonetheless, some scholars have attempted to articulate coherent models of transgender and/or transsexual identity development. Perhaps most notable among these attempts is Devor's (2004) 14-stage developmental model, which outlines a progression from early confusion and persistent attempts at social comparisons to gradual self-acceptance, identity synthesis, and pride. For example, in stage one, abiding anxiety characterizes the individual's distinct discomfort with his/her biological sex and his/her preference for cross-gender activities and companionship. Later, during a first identity comparison stage, the individual compares his/her assigned birth-sex with his/her preferred gender roles, and if discrepant,

begins actively seeking out and experimenting with alternative gender expressions and identities. The fourth stage is gender identity discovery, during which he/she accidentally or intentionally learns about the existence of transsexualism and becomes aware that this phenomenon "fits" his/her own sense of identity. After seeking more information about transsexualism, the person begins a second identity comparison stage characterized by disidentification with the birth-sex and reidentification as "transsexed" or as "transgender." Eventually (and often after a notable delay) the individual accepts his/her transsexual identity and discloses it to others. The fact that Devor's model is specific to transsexualism, rather than the full range of transgender experience, can be seen in the fact that the final stages of the model specifically involve planning, saving money for, and undertaking complete sex reassignment, after which the individual experiences a final sense of integration between mind and body and a resulting experience of self-acceptance and pride.

Importantly, Devor's theoretical model has not been empirically validated (Pardo, 2009). Hence, it is unknown whether the majority of transsexuals follow such a linear progression. Certainly, the linear stage models of lesbian-gay-bisexual identity development on which Devor's model is based have been roundly critiqued and arguably discredited over the years, as empirical research has shown that the process of adopting a sexual-minority identity is often characterized by abrupt, nonlinear, and recursive processes of identity exploration, negotiation, and renegotiation (Diamond, 2005a, 2005b, 2007, 2008; Golden, 1987). Based on such findings, it is plausible that transsexual identity development, too, is complex, dynamic, and nonlinear. Devor's model may only apply to the subset of transgender individuals with clear-cut gender dysphoria, for whom the "discovery" of a mismatch between their psychological sex and their physical body represents a critical turning point.

In acknowledgment of these weaknesses, Devor (2004) actually delivers a stern set of cautions against overgeneralizing his model, noting that "It cannot possibly apply to all individuals,"

that "some people may *never* experience some of the stages," and "that others will move through them in different orders, at different rates, or perhaps not at all" (pp. 43–44). With so many caveats, one may reasonably wonder, "What, then, is the point of a model at all?" Yet although we must remain circumspect about the specific form, order, sequencing, and generalizability of certain transgender developmental pathways, this does not mean that the identification of such pathways is either impossible or inappropriate. The fact that so many transgender-identified individuals report early questioning of their gender identity, often as young as age 10, followed by adoption of a trans-identity around puberty and subsequent disclosure of this identity to others (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006), suggests that the investigation of potential developmental sequences of transgender experience is a plausible and worthwhile goal that may shed light on the nature, etiology, and general trajectory of transgender experience. In particular, it might help to clarify the extent and source of variability in this experience. For example, are differences between *transsexual* adults (who report a notable disjuncture between their psychological and physical gender) and *transgender* adults (who report mixed gender identifications, or who reject all gender identifications) reflected in their early developmental trajectories? Might such developmental differences shed light on the etiology of their distinct experiences?

The conceptual model developed by Denny et al. (2004) attempts to deemphasize the rigid gender binary that characterizes conventional models of gender identity development, and instead presumes the existence of parallel gender continuums inclusive of male and female dimensions. According to this model, individuals can strongly identify with both male and female dimensions, or with neither (Denny et al., 2004). In addition, rather than positing a single modal developmental pathway, it posits the existence of multiple, individualized trajectories. In this respect, the model is similar to Savin-Williams' *differential developmental trajectories* approach to the development of sexual identity (Savin-Williams, 2005; Chapter 28, this

volume). Savin-Williams' differential developmental approach acknowledges that there may be common experiences and developmental milestones which characterize sexual minorities, but nonetheless emphasizes within-group variability in developmental pathways. Hence, rather than seeking one common developmental trajectory, this approach seeks to identify and understand the *multiple* possible trajectories within the sexual-minority population, and to identify the factors which cause trajectories to converge or diverge at different developmental stages.

Debating the Role of the Gender Binary

This differential developmental trajectories approach would appear to be particularly appropriate to modeling the multiplicity of transgender experiences. Importantly, however, this multiplicity should not be interpreted as utterly arbitrary, representing a limitless undoing of all possible positions and forms (Nataf, 1996). Rather, research suggests that there are certain common elements that bridge otherwise diverse transgender experiences, and these common elements deserve careful attention by identity theorists. In particular, we can speak of a general divide between individuals (such as transsexuals) whose experiences revolve around and reinforce a gender binary by seeking the physical presentations of gender that correspond to their psychological sense of gender, and those whose experience of transgender straddles, rejects, or collapses that binary. Similar to Gagné et al. (1997), Ekins and King (1999) have attempted to systematically chart these different manifestations of transgender experience, differentiating between four different types of narratives commonly recounted by transgender individuals: Narratives of *migration*, *oscillation*, *negation* (or "erasing"), and *transcendence*.

In their framework, migration narratives are those recounted by transsexuals, who emphasize the process of "crossing over" permanently from one gender to another, and who speak of finding a "home" in the desired gender. For

these individuals, the transition is permanent and unequivocal. In contrast, transgender individuals with oscillation narratives describe repeated movement back and forth across gender boundaries. They might view one gender identification as "truer" than another, but they do not plan to adopt a permanent gender presentation on either side of the "gender divide." Rather, oscillation transgenderists consider the very process of moving back and forth across the border to be meaningful in and of itself. Importantly, Ekins and King emphasized that this process of moving back and forth across the gender binary did not challenge or dismantle the binary; rather, it functioned to *reinforce* its meaning and rigidity on a cultural level. This is because it is the very *difference* between the male and female "sides" of the border that provides the energy, dynamism, and motivation underlying "border crossing."

In sharp contrast to these two groups, transgender individuals with negation or transcendence narratives pose a more direct challenge to binary notions of gender. As described by Ekins and King, negation narratives speak of erasing or undoing gender – not only the signs and indicators of one's "born" biological sex, but of *all* clear-cut markers and indicators of gender, through selectively adding or eliminating gender-related attributes in a manner that deliberately creates an ambiguous gender presentation. Ekins and King argue that negation narratives actually resemble the growing number of science fiction fantasy stories, which posit futuristic worlds "beyond" gender.

Finally, there are transcendence narratives, which are similar to negation narratives in their attempt to undo and subvert gender, but which have a more explicitly political aim. Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw* (1994) might be considered the paradigmatic expression of this form. In these narratives, the negation and undoing of gender polarities is not simply a personal decision, written on the body and acted out in behavior, but it is explicitly undertaken with the aim of dismantling the hegemonic power of gender dichotomies on a social and cultural level. In transcendence narratives, personal attempts to "ungender" one-self are fundamentally and inextricably linked

with larger political struggles in which the entire social bases of gender-related practices and politics are questioned. As Stone (1991) argued, such transmen and transwomen who reject society's insistence on "passing," and instead allow their ambiguous bodies to be "read" in their complex and unsettling ambiguity, "fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries" (p. 296).

The Personal, the Political, and the Theoretical

The divide between modes of transgender experience that seek to substitute one gender for the other, those that mesh the two genders into an androgynous new whole, and those which seek to dismantle dichotomous notions of gender altogether has become a contentious area of debate among psychological and social theorists of gender. To be sure, this distinction – and the attendant debates – has important implications for theorizing about transgender identity. In particular, as articulated by S. Hines (2006), there appears to be an inherent contradiction between approaches to transgender identity which seek to destabilize the notion of a singular and stable gender identity, and approaches which straightforwardly advocate the substitution of an old, "false" identity with the new, "correct" one. The former approach has been ardently championed by theorists questioning the "naturalness" of sex (most notably Butler, 1990, and Fausto-Sterling, 1993, as noted earlier), and who seek to expose the socially constructed nature of femaleness and maleness altogether. Yet others have cautioned against universalizing this particular interpretation of transgender, which runs the risk of dismissing and invalidating the lived experiences of transsexuals who hold a more conventional sense of authentic gendered selves, and who seek a stable, fixed identity as "male" or "female" (S. Hines, 2006; Namaste, 1996; Prosser, 1998).

The difference between these two types of transgender experience – one operating within conventional gender constructs and one actively resisting them – is sharply manifested

in their respective interpretations of *change and transition.* Both camps are relevant for highlighting elements of transgender identity development. Transsexuals who seek a fixed "home" in one gender or the other (Prosser, 1998; Wilson, 2002) typically view their own trajectory of gender reidentification and authentication as having a defined end, a point in time when the personal gender transformation will be complete. As noted by Wilson (2002), for such individuals the completion of their transformation may entail a withdrawal from the very transgender social and support groups that may have initially proved helpful, since the very identity of "transgender" may cease to hold personal relevance once the new "male" or "female" identity has been successfully adopted. In fact, the former "transgender" identity may be explicitly cast off as a painful reminder of the former false self (see also Brown & Rounsely, 2003).

Yet for transgender individuals who seek to dismantle fixed notions of gender, the process of questioning and transformation may prove to be ever present, with no definitive beginning or end. Furthermore, the transitional process *itself* may change over time. As S. Hines (2006) indicated, "the relationship between gender identity and presentation shifts and evolves *through transition*" (p. 60, emphasis added) such that the degree of "fit" between a certain psychological sense of gender and a particular physical presentation may be quite different 2 years into a transition than it was at the outset. This exemplifies the degree to which no single identity goal is sought. Rather, the overarching aim is to continually seek and approximate a particular form of psychological and physical gender coherence that is, in essence, a moving target.

For these individuals, the journey is itself the outcome. As Kogan (2009) argues in a lucid critique of the recent *legal* history of transgender experience and status, we might best consider all transgender individuals – and for that matter, all "normative" men and women as well – to be undertaking a lifelong "sex/gender journey" (similar to Denny et al., 2004 notion of individualized gender trajectories). In this journey, individuals seek their own particular manifestation of "maleness" or "femaleness," never quite achieving the archetype of "Man" or "Woman" heralded by society, but instead coming to approximate it in different ways at different points during the life course, and sometimes explicitly seeking to manifest or reject *both* archetypes.

Placing Change at the Center: Dynamical Systems Theory

Perhaps the most successful approach to theorizing transgender identity development might be one which places change and transition at the center of analysis, and which views identity "outcomes" as states which are continually constructed and reconstructed over time, rather than achieved with a certain finality. The closest approximation to such an approach, with respect to theory, comes from *dynamical systems theory*. We do not want to imply that this particular strain of theory can "fix" all of the aforementioned weaknesses of existing models of transgender identity development. Rather, we want to highlight dynamical systems theory for the creative and generative possibilities that it offers for future model building.

Dynamical systems models seek to explain how complex patterns emerge, stabilize, change, and restabilize over time. Over the past decade social scientists have increasingly applied this approach to complex human phenomena (for early, seminal examples, see Fogel & Thelen, 1987; Thelen, Kelso, & Fogel, 1987; Thelen & Smith, 1994) to better represent how dynamic interchanges between individuals and their environments give rise to novel forms of thought and behavior. Thus far, dynamical systems approaches have made notable contributions to our understanding of motor development (Kelso, 1997; Turvey, 1990), cognition (Thelen & Smith, 1994), perception (Gilden, 1991), emotion (Fogel, Nwokah, Dedo, & Messinger, 1992; Fogel & Thelen, 1987; Izard, Ackerman, Schoff, & Fine, 2000), personality (Lewis, 2000; Read & Miller, 2002), language (Christman, 2002; Elman, 1995), children's play (Steenbeek &

van Geert, 2005), coping (Lewis, Zimmerman, Hollenstein, & Lamey, 2004), antisocial behavior (Granic & Patterson, 2006), and – most appropriate for this discussion – gender development (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

Dynamical systems models belong to a larger family of theoretical perspectives seeking to replace deterministic models of social-behavioral phenomena with approaches that emphasize dynamic person–environment interactions occurring over time. Other examples of this approach include general systems theory, developmental systems theory, ecological perspectives, contextualism, transactionalism, and holistic-interactionism (reviewed in Granic, 2005). At their core these approaches all emphasize transformative, bidirectional, changing interactions among endogenous factors (such as genes, hormones, skills, capacities, thoughts, and feelings) and exogenous factors (such as relationships, experiences, cultural norms, family history, etc.,). According to dynamical systems theory, interactions among these elements can actually *create* novel psychological and behavioral phenomena during periods of fundamental reorganization in the overall system, denoted "phase shifts" (Granic, 2005). Phase shifts occur when certain parameters governing the system – or certain relationships *among* parameters – start to vary outside of certain critical thresholds (Fogel & Thelen, 1987). As a result, existing patterns of thought and behavior break down and new patterns take their place.

This process, denoted *self-organization*, is defined as the spontaneous development of order within a complex system (Kelso, 1997). A closely related concept is *emergence*, defined as the coming-into-being of altogether novel behaviors or experiences through dynamic, unpredictable interactions between different elements in the system. As reviewed by Fogel (2006), researchers and theorists have increasingly come to view emergence and transformation as fundamental processes of psychological change, encompassing not only qualitative shifts in subjective experience, but also processes of cognitive discovery and creativity (for example Gottlieb, 1992;

Nelson, 1997; Overton, 2002; Tronick et al., 1998).

This would appear to be directly relevant to transgender experience and development. From this perspective, the fundamental task for transgender identity development is not simply to discover, acknowledge, and reveal a deeply hidden "true self," but rather to *create* one's "true self" through a process of self-reflection, perspective-shifting, and (for some) physical transformation (compare to emerging views on the relationship between self-construction and self-discovery in personal identity, as elucidated by Waterman, Chapter 16, this volume and Soenens & Vansteenkiste, Chapter 17, this volume). The new sense of authentic identity which emerges is, in the end, altogether new. It was *not* "in there all along," simply waiting to be released. It is, rather, a hard-fought achievement, a truly novel creation forged out of the individual's entire history of gender experience *and* his/her creative explorations of new forms of gendered self-expression. This perspective actually shares much with Lev's (2004) model of "transgender emergence," which emphasizes the transgender individual's *active engagement* with processes of self-reflection aimed at instantiating a new sense of identity authenticity. One strength of this approach is its necessarily broad timeframe – the process of identity transition and transformation is necessarily open, and potentially recursive, revisited repeatedly as the individual occupies different contexts and seeks to integrate new traits and characteristics into his/her emerging sense of self. Another strength of this approach is the active and autonomous role granted to the transgender individual. The specific nature and character of the authentic identity is *in one's own hands* – not dictated by social norms, therapists, or medical standards. Hence, "mixed" forms of gender presentation which might be deemed "incomplete" from the perspective of developmental models based on transsexualism, are instead authentic and viable identity outcomes. The application of dynamical systems theory to transgender identity and development is one of the most provocative and interesting directions for future research.

Intersections with Sexuality

Another important element which requires more systematic integration into future models of transgender identity development concerns the complex interplay between gender identity and sexual identity and orientation. Historically, it was presumed that the link between gender identity and sexual identity/orientation was fairly straightforward: being attracted to women was a fundamental component of being a man, and being attracted to men was a fundamental component of being a woman (Block, 1909; Forel, 1908; Krafft-Ebing, 1882). According to this logic, men who were attracted to men were not *completely* male; they possessed, instead, some degree of essential femininity. The same logic, in reverse, applied to women who were attracted to women. This conflation between same-sex desire and "gender reversal" (such that gay men are necessarily feminine and lesbians necessarily masculine) has been vigorously critiqued over the years by researchers studying the development and expression of same-sex sexuality (Gottschalk, 2003; Hegarty, 2009; Paul, 1993; Rottnek, 1999). In the context of transgender, this model would appear to suggest that *all* transgender individuals are fundamentally gay, lesbian, or bisexual *before* modifying their original gender presentation (i.e., those born with female bodies are attracted to women, and those born with male bodies are attracted to men), and fundamentally heterosexual afterwards (because by switching their own gender identity, they have transformed a same-sex attraction into an other-sex attraction). Yet this simplistic model of the links between gender identity and sexual orientation simply does not fit the empirical data. Research has documented incredible diversity in transgender individuals' experiences of same-sex and other-sex desire, both before and after modifying their gender identities and presentations (Hines, 2007). Some male-to-female transsexuals seek female sexual partners and identify as lesbians; others seek male partners and identify as heterosexual women (Chivers & Bailey, 2000). Some biologically female transgender individuals

identify as butch (i.e., highly masculine) lesbians and continue to participate actively in the lesbian community, whereas others take on identities as men and seek heterosexual female partners; yet others pursue sexual relations with both men and women. This diversity is possible because gender identity and sexual identity, despite conventional assumptions to the contrary, are fundamentally distinct constructs, such that variability in one dimension does not neatly map onto the other (Devor, 1997; Lawrence, 2004).

At the same time, this does not mean that gender and sexuality are altogether unrelated. For some individuals, these two forms of identity reciprocally inform and influence one another, such that one's experience of "femaleness" and "maleness" is interbraided with one's subjective understanding, experience, and interpretation of sexual desire for female and male partners. Correspondingly, experiences of "same-sex" and "other-sex" desire and behavior are often embedded within the social and interpersonal context of gender presentation – after all, the very designation of a particular desire or behavior as "same sex" or "other sex" requires a stable appraisal of the gender status of everyone involved. Hence, although gender identity and sexual identity are separate phenomena, their relationship is dynamic and reciprocal, informed by an individual's personal sense of gender *and* his/her appraisal of the gender of social partners. It is not surprising, then, that individuals who begin to explore multiplicity and fluidity with respect to their gender identity often become progressively more aware of multiplicity and fluidity in their erotic attractions as well. S. Hines (2007), for example, noted that just as gender is an inherently relational phenomenon, actively negotiated through interactions with other (gendered) individuals, so too is sexuality, and especially for individuals who have questioned, modified, or rejected their natal sex. For these individuals, their subjective experience and understanding of desire necessarily change as their own relationship to their body, their identity, *and* the bodies and identities of their intimate partners changes.

An example of this dynamic interplay between fluidity in gender and fluidity in sexuality is

provided by "Mark," a participant in Diamond's (2008) longitudinal study of sexual identity development. Mark was born with a female body, and grew up with a conventional female gender identity. He had been aware of sexual attractions to women since adolescence, and during his early twenties he identified as lesbian. Yet over the years, he began to question his gender identity, and eventually adopted a male gender presentation. Surprisingly, he found that as he delved deeper into the masculine sides of his personality, and took on an increasingly masculine role in self-presentation and interpersonal interaction, he became unexpectedly attracted *to men* (although his attractions to women did not diminish). As Mark described, "It was odd; guys would flirt with me, and I would be like, "Hey, I don't mind that. That doesn't turn me off or make me angry or whatever. Because it used to really annoy me, and it doesn't anymore." (Diamond, 2008, p. 196). Mark connected his own reconstituted experiences of desire for men with his changed appraisal of men's social location with respect to his own: he noted that it was the traditional male-female heterosexual dynamic that he had always found distasteful. Now that he identified as Mark, his desires for men – and his interpersonal and sexual interactions with them – no longer inhabited the conventional male-female heterosexual dynamic, and this shift opened up new erotic possibilities. Mark also described changes in the *types* of men he found attractive after taking on a masculine gender presentation, and these changes were intriguingly related to issues of power and social location. As Mark became "more male" himself, he became increasingly attracted to openly gay men. Hence, although he was still biologically female, and the objects of his desire were male, he experienced these desires (and the resulting erotic dynamic) as fundamentally *homosexual* rather than heterosexual, reflecting a "gay male" side of himself. Perhaps because this form of desire permitted him to maintain more control than is typically afforded heterosexual women in their interactions with men, Mark felt much more comfortable with his attractions to – and relationships with – men than had been the case when he was a teenage

girl. His experiences clearly indicate that the critical "trigger" for Mark's sexual desires was never, in fact, a stable, trait-like degree of femininity or masculinity in another person, but instead a particular interpersonal dialectic regarding gender and social relations.

Such experiences highlight the value of attending to the complex, mutual, dynamic influences between gender identity and sexual identity, and their embeddedness in specific social locations. In modeling multiple trajectories of transgender identity development, we must take care to treat the degree of interdependence between gender identity and sexual identity/desire as an open question, and one which might vary dramatically across different individuals, and also across different stages of the lifespan. Charting these forms of variation, and exploring their implications for long-term self-esteem and well-being among transgender youth and adults, is a key direction for future research.

Mental Health Implications of Transgender Identity

We have considered a multiplicity of identity outcomes and trajectories. Now, what are their implications for mental health? For example, is it "healthier" to transition to a fixed gender identity which conforms to conventional boundaries separating "male" and "female," or to seek a liminal, fluid, transgender identity which collapses and deconstructs those categories? To answer this question, we must consider the major threats to psychological health among transgender men and women.

Research reliably indicates that social stigmatization – manifested in some cases by outright physical victimization – poses the preeminent threat to transgender individuals' mental and physical health. These findings concord with the *minority stress* model of sexual-minority health (Meyer, 2003), which specifies that sexual minorities' acute exposure to environmental stressors such as verbal or physical abuse, institutional discrimination, interpersonal harassment,

and general social marginalization confers cumulative psychological stress. This stress, in turn, negatively affects both mental and physical well-being.

Institutional reports, popular media, and biographical accounts document an abundance of gender prejudice and gender-based violence perpetrated against transgender individuals (Brown & Rounsely, 2003; Feinberg, 1996, 2006). A recurring survey conducted by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) of bias-motivated violence against gender and sexual minorities has found that hate crimes against gender-nonconforming adolescents and adults accounted for one-fifth of all documented murders (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 1999, 2007). A recent survey of 515 trans-identified people (392 male-to-female, 123 female-to-male; Clements-Nolle, Marx, & Katz, 2006), reported that 28% of the respondents had been in an alcohol or drug treatment program, 62% had experienced gender discrimination, 83% had experienced gender-related, verbal discrimination, 59% had experienced sexual assault (rape), and 32% had reported attempted suicide. Among the sample's youth (< 25 years of age), nearly half had attempted suicide as a result of gender-based victimization.

It should be no surprise that other recent empirical investigations suggest that gender-nonconforming adolescents are particularly vulnerable to environmental stressors. Brown and Rounsely (1996), for example, found that gender-nonconforming adolescents routinely experienced taunting, teasing, and bullying at school. Sausa (2005) reported that nearly all the gender-nonconforming adolescents in his study recalled school-based verbal and physical harassment, which left three-quarters of them feeling unsafe. They felt singled out or traumatized several times a day, including during gym class, at school events, or when using single-sex restrooms. In yet another study (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002), lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth confirmed that peers verbally harassed and physically abused their gender-nonconforming peers more frequently than themselves.

Even youths who escape victimization in school must contend with heightened psychosocial stress in their daily lives. In addition to the normative stressors associated with adolescent social and psychological development, gender-nonconforming adolescents often struggle with an increasing awareness that their *psychological* sense of self does not neatly correspond to their body. The physical changes brought about by puberty only heighten this discrepancy, potentially escalating a youth's potential sense of internal alienation and confusion. Youths may be unable to articulate to others *why* they feel different, and hence frequently report feeling isolated, depressed, hopeless, or utterly invisible to friends and family (Swann & Herbert, 1999). From a symbolic interactionist perspective (Serpe & Stryker, Chapter 10, this volume), it might be viewed as inevitable that a youth's gender nonconformity influences his psychological well-being, given that the social stigma attached to gender nonconformity necessarily alters – sometimes profoundly – the nature of such a youth's social interchanges with strangers as well as friends and family. Hence, to the extent that psychological well-being is fundamentally embedded in social relations, the altered social relations of gender-nonconforming youths create notable strains for their psychological development.

Left unchecked, the accumulation of stressors at home, at school, and at work may provoke sustained feelings of shame, alienation, and inadequacy among gender-nonconforming youths. To cope with these feelings, youths may display a range of externalizing problems, including running away from home, dropping out of school, abusing substances, or self-harm (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2001; Sausa, 2005). Others may seek to modify their bodies to achieve a greater sense of comfort and personal authenticity. For example, some transgender adolescents with particularly pronounced cross-gender identifications have reported self-injecting silicone or steroids to create a more feminine or masculine appearance in accordance with their gender identity. Klein (1999) suggested that restricted access to carefully monitored and orchestrated gender transitions can

result in increased risk-taking behavior including self-mutilation, substance abuse, prostitution, and exposure to HIV.

In the context of these risks and stressors, what conclusions might we draw about different trajectories of transgender identity development? One likely possibility is that during the adolescent years, it may be difficult – or impossible – to tell whether a particular youth is "headed" for one trajectory or another. Although some adolescents may self-identify as transsexual at fairly early ages, expressing clear desires to permanently change their gender, it is important to remember that such youths may perceive that this is the *only* outcome of gender questioning. The possibility of adopting a more fluid, liminal sense of gender may have never occurred to many youths; in addition, they are unlikely to have any visible models of such forms of gender fluidity. Hence, their ability to craft a meaningful autobiographical narrative (see McAdams, Chapter 5, this volume) which contains – and makes sense of – their conflicting and changing experiences of masculinity and femininity is impaired. Given this limitation, the healthiest identity trajectory for transgender adolescents may be one which makes no presumptions about desirable outcomes, and sets no timetables for resolution, but instead remains open to multiple possibilities over potentially long periods of time. Youths need time, support, information, and autonomy as they grapple with their own sense of gendered selfhood and seek a comfortable and personally authentic constellation of female-typed, male-typed, and gender-neutral traits. *Changes* in this constellation – at the level of cognition as well as appearance, and occurring during adolescence as well as adulthood – may be part and parcel of the identity development process.

One thing, however, is abundantly clear. Neither transgender youths nor adults can embark on this process without a basic sense of safety. As long as transgender individuals are forced to navigate their school and family worlds with an ever-present, debilitating fear of stigmatization, ostracization, humiliation, and physical violence, they cannot be expected to achieve a healthy sense of self-determination, whether such self-determination involves switching their gender identity or making peace with a lasting sense of gender fluidity.

With respect to transgender youth, it is evident that supportive adults play a key role in facilitating resilience and positive development (Garofalo, Deleon, Osmer, Doll, & Harper, 2006; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006). Decades of research on resilience, conducted with mainstream as well as at-risk populations, has shown that adults can strengthen youth by teaching them how to respond positively to adversity (Bernard, 2006). With respect to transgender youth in particular, adults may require special education and awareness. For example, learning the preferred name and pronoun usage of a transgender youth is critical to gaining their trust and supporting their own developmental pathway. Similarly, ensuring and maintaining confidentiality is critical for demonstrating to transgender youth that their safety will not be compromised, given the risks that these youths typically face for discrimination and violence. Finally, research on resilience (Bernard, 2006) also indicates that young people flourish when they know that adults believe and nurture their capacity to succeed. Accordingly, it is important to encourage transgender and gender-nonconforming youth to be visible and proud leaders and role models for others just like them.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have reviewed the literature on the documented diversity of transgender experience, as well as previous research on the development of transgender identity. In contrast to the theoretical identity models based on sexuality research which prioritize stable, uniform endpoints, we have argued for new, flexible models that conceptualize transgender identity development as a dynamic, highly individualized process, which may be undertaken multiple times over the lifespan, and for which the *journey* is as important as the outcome. We make a call for new lines of empirical research using this approach to

explore the full range of trajectories of transgender identity development. Identity models organized around the process of change and *transition itself*, rather than those which prescribe a limited range of "healthy" outcomes, will be most successful in elucidating the individual and contextual factors which promote mental and physical well-being among transgender youths and adults, and which support their self-actualization.

In many ways, the state of flux and transformation that currently characterizes research on identity development among transgender populations resembles similar transformations that took place within the field of sexual identity research regarding acknowledgment and validation of bisexuality. With a few notable exceptions (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1977; Paul, 1985; Shuster, 1987), early investigations of sexual identity development focused exclusively on lesbian and gay individuals, not even mentioning bisexuals in the title (reviewed in Diamond, 2008). Yet both researchers and laypeople persistently questioned whether bisexuality represented a "true" and stable identity or whether it was best construed as a transitional phase that individuals traversed on the way to their "true" homosexuality (Rust, 2000, 2001). Overall, this battle has been largely resolved, and most researchers now consider bisexuality to be a stable identity in and of itself with its own distinctive phenomenology and developmental trajectory (Rust, 2002; Weinberg, Williams, & Pryor, 1994). However, the long-fought battle for such legitimacy exemplifies the degree to which psychologists have difficulty reconciling the notion that a healthy identity might, in fact, be characterized by a fundamental *liminality* in sexual and gender expression.

We now face a similar crossroads with respect to transgender identity development. Whereas previous research on transgender populations has presumed that the fundamental identity "project" was to unilaterally switch from one gender to the other, and has focused primarily on their psychological deficits and challenges, it is now time to acknowledge the complexity of the transgender population and to explore how the multiple meanings that transgender individuals attach to their shifting gender identities may positively influence their identity development and their overall well-being. Toward this end, we must work systematically to develop and test models which allow for a multiple continuum framework that allows for simultaneous parallel continuums for biological sex (more to less female and more to less male), gender identity (man to not-man and woman to not-woman), and gender expression (more to less masculine and more to less feminine) (Doorn, Poortinga, & Verschoor, 1994; Girchick, 2008). As Devor argued (2004), "each of us has a deep need to be witnessed by others for whom we are" (p. 46). By respecting and scientifically investigating the full range of transgender experiences and transgender developmental trajectories, identity theorists can play a critical part in this witnessing.

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